CRABBE AND THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

A Portion of

SOME ASPECTS OF GEORGE CRABBE'S REALISM

A DISSERTATION

SUBMITTED TO THE BOARD OF UNIVERSITY STUDIES OF THE JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY IN CONFORMITY WITH THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

1938

BY

VARLEY HOWE LANG

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THESIS SUMMARY

George Crabbe, although the outstanding realist of all English poets, has received little attention from scholars. Important phases of his work have been overlooked or misinterpreted. The dissertation, *Aspects of George Crabbe's Realism,* seeks to supply these deficiencies and correct these errors. It analizes Crabbe's temperament and traces the influence of his life and environment on his work, studies his predeliction for decay and sordidness, his use of detail, atmosphere and background, his relation to the eighteenth century, his moralizing, his delineations of character, his narrative method, and, finally, has appraised his poetic ability. The following is a chapter from the dissertation, plus supplementary material.

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CRABBE AND THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

By Varley Lang

1.

Crabbe and the Eighteenth Century Pastoral[1]

In examining Crabbe's roots in the literature of the eighteenth century, an interesting fact comes to light— his *Village* is not such a bolt from the blue as most literary historians would have us believe; he forms a link in a series of changes and additions in the Pastoral form whose progress this article will briefly trace. Of Pastoralism in England, the *Cambridge History of English Literature* says: "Gay's *Shepherd's Week*, with its parody of Philips, had helped to kill it; and Crabbe certainly owed something to the form and tone of Gay's poem."[2] But the story is not nearly so simple as that. Gay's *Shepherd's Week* didn't kill the Pastoral in England, which flourished to the very end of the eighteenth century, as anyone can see who will take the trouble to look into Anderson's *British Poets*; but the form underwent changes and additions adumbrating the realism of Crabbe's *village*. *The Shepherd's Week*, while retaining conventional Pastoral forms, burlesques them through the comic dialogue of the shepherds and the use of material unheard of in a Golden Age. The shepherds are country louts and husky rural wenches and the prosaic problems of such characters arise in the very love-making and elegiac lamentations. Such homely English flora as the daisy, gilly flower, mary-gold and king-cup grow in English landscapes and traditional superstitions of the English peasantry are employed. This realism is, of course, introduced for a comic contrast to the Sicilian dream and is to be distinguished from Allan Ramsay's *Gentle Shepherd*, which is a comedy in which realistic touches are introduced in all seriousness in order to give more vitality to the Pastoral form. Ramsay's characters are Scotch

[1] For a complete study of the eclogue in the 18th century both from the creative and critical standpoint see M. K. Bragg, *The Formal Eclogue in Eighteenth Century England*, 1926.

[2] 11. 7. 144.

peasants speaking their own lowland dialect and there are many passages of genuine freshness derived from an honest representation of first-hand observation. The following delightful sight of Meggy is an example:

> Last morning I was gye and early out,
> Upon a dyke I lean'd glowring about,
> I saw my Meg come linking o'er the lee,—
> I saw my Meg, but Meggy saw na me;
> For yet the sun was wading thro' the mist,
> And she was close upon me e'er she wist;
> Her coats were kiltet, and did sweetly shaw
> Her straight bare legs that whiter were than snaw.
> Her cockernony snooded up fu sleek,
> Her hoffet locks hang wavin' on her cheek;
> Her cheek sae ruddy and her een sae dear;
> And O! her mouth's like ony hinny pear.
> Neat, neat she was, in bustine waist coat clean,
> As she came skiffing o'er the dewy green.
>
> (Act 1, Sc. 1)

Still more interesting for its connection with Crabbe is Ramsay's recognition of the less pleasant aspects of rural existence. Here is a realistic picture of a peasant's bride:

> O 'tis a pleasant thing to be a bride,
> Syne whinging getts about your ingle-side,
> Yelping for this or that with fasheous din!
> To mak them brats then ye maun toil and spin.
> Ae wean fa's sick, arre scads itself wi'brue—
> Ane breeks his shin—anither tines his shoe. (Sc. 2)

These two poets, then, indicate a dissatisfaction with a form which in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries lost the native, realistic elements employed by Spenser and Browne and became bloodless and conventionalized. As far as the setting and characters were concerned they developed into poetic exercises, milk and water affairs, utterly divorced from reality or even an idealization of truth. But it was not long before a few poets, at least, wearied of dealing with Arcadias in an age that was always "golden," whose streams were inevitably "silvery" or "crystal," and whose "happy swains" competed in "amorous song" for "lambs and milk" while the monotonously "vocal boughs" returned the same strain in endless repetition, eclogue after eclogue.

Gay's *Beggar's Opera* contained in it a strain which was to continue throughout the century—the town eclogue, burlesquing the formal rural Pastoral. One of the first and most vigorous of the iconoclasts was Swift. In his "A Town Eclogue," a bawd and her pimp discuss the business and the season — Spring ironically enough—amid the bustle in front of the London Exchange. It is harsh realism hardly relieved by its grim humor. Even an author who uses the Pastoral form seriously and in the traditional manner sometimes recognizes the absurdities. Such a one is Jago whose "Ardenna" or Pastoral Eclogue is to be contrasted with "The Scavengers" or Town Eclogue. This records the conversation between two street cleaners, man and wife, who collect and sell dung for a living. The conventional love debate in antiphonal verse is under fire. Jago begins:

> Awake, my muse, prepare a loftier theme.
> The winding valley, and the dimpled stream
> Delight not all: quit, quit the verdant field,
> And try what dusty streets, and alleys yield.

Times are bad, the scavengers find difficulty in making an honest living. And, even as there is so much weather in the traditional Pastoral, so here it plays a part:

> Old Pestel
>
> Alas! was ever such fine weather seen,
> How dusty are the roads the streets how clean!
> How long, ye almanacks! will it be dry?
> Empty my cart how long and idle I! . . .
> See what little dab of dirt is here!
> But yields all Warwick more, O tell me where!
> Yet, on this spot, though now so naked seen,
> Heaps upon heaps, and loads on loads have been.
> Bigger, and bigger thy proud dunghill grew,
> Till my diminished house was hid from view.

His wife, as is natural, dwells upon the more social aspects of the once mighty mound:

> Wife
>
> When goody Dobbins call'd me nasty bear,
> And talked of kennels, and the ducking chair,
> With patience I could hear the scolding quean,
> For sure 'twas dirtiness that kept me clean. . . .

The importance, for us, of the town eclogue is that it associates realism in character and surroundings with the Pastoral form, though its purely destructive side is also interesting. Crabbe must have read many of these poems for they not only were composed by such prominent figures as Swift, Gay, and Pope [3] but were quite popular in the seventies, the decade before the publication of *The Village*.[4] But changes were taking place within the Pastoral itself which pointed in the same direction. Ramsay and Gay have already been noticed, and here, again, Swift is in the van with his "A Pastoral Dialogue" in which two rustics, in the traditional antiphonal verse, make love to each other. It is a *real* love scene between *real* rustics in *real* surroundings and engaged in a *real* occupation.

A nymph and swain, Sheelah and Dermot hight,
Who wont to weed the court of Gosford Knight;
While each with stubbed knife remov'd the roots,
That raised between the stones their daily shoots;
As at their work they sate in counter view,
With mutual beauty smit, their passion grew,
Sing, heavenly muse, in sweetly flowing strain
The soft endearments of the nymph and swain.

Dermot

My love to Sheelah is more firmly fixt,
Than strongest weeds that grow these stones betwixt:
My spud these nettles from the stone can part;
No knife so keen to weed thee from my heart.

Sheelah

My love for gentle Dermot faster grows,
Than yon tall dock that rises to thy nose.
Cut down the dock, 'twill sprout again: but oh!
Love rooted out again will never grow.

Dermot

No more that brier thy tender leg shall rake
(I spare the thistles for Sir Author's sake)
Sharp are the stones, take thou this rushy mat;
The hardest bum will bruise with sitting squat.

---

[3] See Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's series of six town eclogues, four by herself, one by Pope, and one by Gay.

[4] Miss Bragg notices William Kenrick's *Love in Suds* (5th ed., 1772) and Andrew Erskine's four town eclogues (1883).

This is still on the burlesque side as is his "Pastoral Dialogue, Written After the News of the King's Death"; but many of the elements for Crabbe's realistic picture of country life are here, including the humble flora—weeds, docks, and nettles.

John Scott, taking up the romanticised eclogue type introduced by Collin's *Oriental Eclogues* (1740), gives a grim picture of famine and disease, thus continuing the tendency to dissipate the golden mist of the Sicilian dream.

Churchill's "Prophecy of Famine, A Scot's Pastoral" is still more interesting. While it is an avowed satire against the Scotch, it also has importance for its realism. He is tired of the usual poet's patter:

> Then the rude Theocrite is ransack'd o'er
> And courtly Marco call'd from Mincio's shore;
> Sicilian muses on our mountains roam,
> Easy and free as if they were at home:
> Nymphs, maids, nereids, dryads, satyrs, fauns,
> Sport in our floods, and trip it o'er our laws;
> Flow'rs which once flourish'd fair in Greece and Rome,
> More fair revive in England's meads to bloom;
> Skies without cloud exotic suns adorn:
> And roses blush, but blush without a thorn;
> Landscapes unknown to dowdy nature, rise,
> And new creations strike our wondering eyes.

This is very much like the opening of Crabbe's *Village*:

> Fled are those times, when, in harmonious strains
> The rustic poet praised his native plains!
> No shepherds now in smooth alternate verse,
> Their countries beauty or their nymphs' rehearse;
> Yet still for these we frame the tender strain,
> Still in our lays fond Corydons complain,
> And shepherds' boys their amorous pain reveal,
> The only pains alas! they never feel.
> On Mincio's banks in Caesar's bounteous reign,
> If Tityrus found the Golden Age again,
> Must sleepy bard's the flattering dream prolong,
> Mechanic echoes of the Mantuan song!

Then Churchill, like Crabbe, proceeds to tell us what the shepherd's life is actually like in the bleak highlands of Scotland—even worse, perhaps, than on the barren, marshy coast of Suffolk and the mockery of Pastoralism continues:

Two boys, whose birth beyond all question springs
From great and glorious, though forgotten kings,
Shepherds of Scottish lineage born and bred
On the same bleak and barren mountain's head,
By niggard nature doom'd on the same rocks
To spin out life, and starve themselves and flocks,
Fresh as the morning, which enrob'd in mist,
The mountain's top with usual dullness kiss'd,
Jokey and Sawney to their labours rose;
Soon clad I ween, where nature needs no clothes,
Where, from their youth inur'd to winter skies.
Dress and her vain refinements they despise. . . .
Far as the eye could reach, no tree was seen,
Earth, clad in russet, scorned the lively green . . .
No living thing whate'er its food, feasts there,
But the cameleon who can feast on air.
No birds, except as birds of passage flew,
No bee was known to hum, no dove to coo.
No stream as amber smooth, as amber clear,
Were seen to glide, or heard to warble here. . . .
One, and but one poor solitary cave,
Too sparing of her favours, nature gave;
That one alone . . .
Shelter at once for man and beast supplied.
Their snares without entangling briers spread,
And thistles, arm'd against the invader's head,
Stood in close ranks all entrance to oppose. . . .
. . . marking her noisome road
With poison'd trail, here crawl'd the bloated toad;
There webs were spread of more than common size,
And half starved spiders prey'd on half starved flies!
In quest of food, efts strove in vain to crawl;
Slugs pinched with hunger, smear'd the slimy wall. . . .
Here, for the sullen sky was overcast,
And summer shrunk beneath a wintry blast,
A native blast, which, arm'd with hail and rain,
Beat unrelenting on the naked swain,
The boys for shelter made; behind the sheep,
Of which those shepherds every day take keep,
Sickly crept on, and with complainings rude,
On nature seemed to call and bleat for food.

The sense of fruitless toil in a nature which is harsh, meager, unpleasant and repellent is likewise produced by *The Village*:

Lo! where the heath, with withering brake grown o'er,
Lends the light turf that warms the neighboring poor;
From thence a length of burning sand appears,

Where the thin harvest waves its wither'd ears;
Rank weeds, that art and care defy,
Reign o'er the land, and rob the blighted rye:
There thistles stretch their prickly arms afar,
And to the ragged infant threaten war;
There poppies, nodding, mock the hope of toil;
There the blue bugloss paints the sterile soil;
Hardy and high, above the slender sheaf,
The slimy mallow waves her silky leaf;
O'er the young shoot the charlock throws a shade,
And clasping tares cling round the sickly blade;
With mingled tints the rocky coasts abound,
And a sad splendour vainly shines around.

"The Scotch Postoral" is all the more interesting because Crabbe knew Churchill's poetry.[5]

In 1768 John Scott published his *Amoebean Eclogues*; and in the advertisement he gives expression to the same idea which occurred later to Crabbe:

Much of the rural imagery which our country affords, has already been introduced in poetry; but many obvious and pleasing appearances seem to have totally escaped notice—to describe these, is the business of the following Eclogues.

Scott is fascinated by the same "sad splendour" which Crabbe portrays and he gives remarkably accurate and detailed pictures of the humbler, drabber, less noticed aspects of nature:

First

These pollard oaks their tawny leaves retain,
These hardy horn beans yet unstripped remain,
The wintry groves all else admit the view
Through naked stems of many a varied hue.

Second

Yon shrubby slopes a pleasing mixture show;
There the rough elm and smooth white privet grow,
Strait shoots of ash with dark of glossy gray
Red cornel twigs, and maple's russet spray.

First

These stony steeps with spreading moss abound,
Gray on the trees, and green upon the ground;
With tangling brambles ivy interweaves,
And bright mezerion spreads its clust'ring leaves.

[5] He quotes him twice as a motto for *The Borough* 3.

Second

Old oaken stubs tough saplings there adorn,
There hedge-row plashes yield the knotty thorn; . . .

First

When yon brown hazel's pendent catkins bear,
And prickly furze unfolds its blossoms fair,
The vagrant artist oft at ease reclines,
And brooms green shoots in besan's neat combines.

Scott also appends botanical notes to his poems just as numerous and sciential as those of Crabbe.

Outside of the field of the Pastoral, descriptive poetry contains more and more of the elements, as the eighteenth century progresses, which are so characteristic of Crabbe's verse. The development of closer and more detailed description, of the inclusion of the less pleasant and more neglected features of nature in topographical and descriptive verse, has been traced by others ;[6] an outline, therefore, will suffice, my purpose being simply to show that the poet is not so revolutionary as may be supposed, though he gives stronger and fuller expression to such phases of nature than his predecessors.

Even before Thomson's *Winter* (1726) there is discernible a considerable interest in nature. For our purposes, the most interesting are three poems on Winter by Dr. Armstrong which turn from the soft and placid to the sterner aspects of English scenery and show direct observation with an "occasional homely realism suggestive of Crabbe."[7] Dyer's *Grongar Hill* continues this tendency by including some features of nature not previously considered poetic, such as naked rocks and barren ground. Of the group of poets who participated in the vogue for topographical poetry which sprang up after 1767, many are of interest. John Scott in his *Amwell*, for example, sometimes captures less obvious, more evanescent beauties of nature. Later in the Century descriptive poetry turns more and more to fresher and closer observation. Thomas Gisborne in his *Walks in a Forest* (1794) gives pictures of minute detail and shows appreciation of beauties which most people miss; he

[6] This outline is based upon R. D. Havens, *The Influence of Milton on English Poetry*, ch. 12; and Myra Reynolds, *The Treatment of Nature in English Poetry*.
[7] *The Treatment of Nature in English Poetry*, 79.

also deals with the harsher and more rugged scenery. Grahame's nature poems (*The Rural Calendar*, 1797; *Sabbath Walks*, 1804; *Birds of Scotland*, 1806) also are interesting for their departure from the more conventional scenery such as gardens, meadows, gravelled paths, smooth turf, to the wilder landscape of Scotland. Although Cowper has no taste for such scenes as Grahame's verse deals with, yet his treatment is like Crabbe's both in its accuracy and detail and in its homeliness. He pictures such everyday rural scenes as feeding hens, foddering cattle, cutting wood, and plowing, and his description of the flora of the countryside is also reminiscent of Crabbe in its minute characterization and exact detail. There are other poets and poems not mentioned in this outline showing similar tendencies, but these are the most important.[8]

2.

Satire

It must be emphasized that Crabbe's claim to originality rests largely in his masterly treatment of character, in his psychological realism. There is nothing in eighteenth century verse which approaches his skillful depiction of men and women; the nearest thing is the character portrait which, being satirical, is usually only a caricature, however brilliant. Crabbe, unlike his predecessors in the century, does not approve of personal satire:

> I love not the satiric muse:
> No man on earth would I abuse;
> Nor with empoison'd verses grieve
> The most offending son of Eve.

Even in the realm of satire he insists upon truth and accuracy:

> Man as he is to place in all men's view,
> Yet none with rancour, none with scorn pursue:
> Nor be it ever of my portraits told—
> 'Here the strong lines of malice we behold!'[9]

---

[8] Thomson despite his historical importance in nature poetry, has not been mentioned because his classical method of description is the opposite from Crabbe's close delineation. He is interesting, however, for his treatment of the sterner aspects of nature.

[9] *The Borough* 24. 440-43.

This is what distinguishes his satire from that of the eighteenth century—he gives a full picture, both faults *and* virtues, for without both the representation is not accurate; and he is above all a realist. Catholics, Jews, and enthusiasts are fair game in any eighteenth century satire; but, even here, where dealing with traditional material, Crabbe scrupulously gives the other side:

> A part there are, whom doubtless man might trust,
> Worthy as wealthy, pure, religious, just.[10]

Lawyers and physicians have also suffered grievously from the satiric muse; but even for them Crabbe has a word of praise to balance the catalogue of faults.[11] The method is rather like that of Dryden in *Absolam and Achitophel* than of Pope in *The Dunciad*. The scourge of satire is softened by a balance between good and bad and its sting alleviated by sympathy and pity—in all things Crabbe must be fair, accurate, and truthful. His comment on Benbow—one of the inmates of the Almshouse is applicable to his treatment of character in general. This fellow had been a bad lot, though some were willing to extenuate his faults, while others found no excuses for him. What is the correct attitude?

> Gen'rous and free, he paid but small regard
> To trade, and fail'd, and some declared 'twas hard:
> These were his friends—his foes conceived the case
> Of common kind; he sought and found disgrace:
> The reasoning few, who neither scorn'd nor loved,
> His feelings pitied and his fault reproved.[12]

Crabbe, "sparing criminals, attacks the crime." In this and in his tendency to "Attack a book—attack a song," instead of the writer or the singer, he approaches nearer than do most of his predecessors to the eighteenth century theory of satire to the ideal of general classical satire expounded by Dryden and Pope but practiced very little by either. He strikes at the melodramatic devices of novelists, the spurious claims of physicians, the dishonesty of lawyers, the avarice of Jews and the false lights of Pastoralism without stooping to malicious personal satire.

[10] *Ib.* 4. 246-7. [11] See *Ib.* 6; 7. [12] *Ib.* 16. 15-20.

3.

Humanism and Other Qualities

Crabbe, in his first two long poems—*The Parish Register* and *The Borough*—adapts to his own purposes a form popular in eighteenth century literature—the character portrait, the main differences being that they are seldom satirical (and then with the differences noted above) and possess elements of humorous realism and genuine pathos. But even so early Crabbe's distinguishing mark of psychological realism and accuracy are in evidence. Later, of course, the portrait is extended into the narrative and other elements are added. But even in the *Tales* earmarks of the earlier habit are discernible. For example, in "Jesse and Colin" there is an excellent opportunity for handling a group of people in the house of Jesse's aunt, but Crabbe, following the series-of-character-portraits method of his predecessors, takes no advantage of the situation. First the aunt is introduced, then the three servants successively are made to paint their own characters; but he fails to relate them, to weld them into a group; they remain excellent but disjointed portraits.[13]

Fundamentally, as with the eighteenth century, the subjects of Crabbe's poetry are men and manners. In *The Parish Register* and *The Borough* he deals with their marriages, loves, errors, peccadillos, amusements, trades, professions, clubs, societies, and institutions, the chief differences between Crabbe's treatment and that of most eighteenth-century poetry being that the men and manners are not those of London, that the whole is informed with good-humored realism rather than harsh satire or easy familiarity, and, lastly, that a larger proportion is given over to the poorer and lower classes. His tendency to dwell lovingly on man's dwellings—houses, and inns—and his other material surroundings is a quality to be found again and again in his eighteenth-century predecessors.[14] It is interesting also to notice how much George's existence [15]

[13] See also character sketch introducing *Tales of the Hall,* 14, a remnant of the former method.

[14] For a typical 18th century "manners" poem, done in their favorite light, half-satirical way, see poem in dialogue called "Flirtation."

[15] *Tales of the Hall,* 1.

approaches the eighteenth-century ideal as expressed in Pomfret's " Choice." A simple, moderate life, spent in enjoying simple, moderate pleasures; no romantic yearnings, no seeking after ecstatic bliss, none of that

> Lighter gas, that, taken in the frame,
> The spirit heats, and sets the blood in flame. (176-7)

The love for ease and quiet, for *social* pleasures, in short the somewhat ox-paced existence spent in the enjoyment of common, everyday, practical things, is George Crabbe's choice as well as Pomfret's. It is to be remarked how often and how well he writes of these simple and essentially social pleasures:

> Bright shone the fire, wine sparkled, sordid care
> Was banished far, at least appear'd not there;
> A kind and social spirit each possess'd,
> And thus began his tale the friendly guest.[16]

There are many other qualities of Crabbe which are obviously related to the century in which he was born; these will be touched on before turning to his theory of poetry and its connection with neo-classicism. His disillusion is one of the dominant traits in the eighteenth-century literature; the sense of human limitations, of the ephemeral aspect of earthly happiness, the recognition of the vast amount of suffering in the sphere of our sorrow and the acceptance of its existence, the disbelief in a future glorious state for man on earth—all of these are familiar notes. One of man's principal limitations is his over-reliance upon his own reason; authority of some kind is necessary as a guiding light; hence Crabbe's authoritarian attitude. Church and State must be venerated, while too much freedom of thought and speculation is a bad thing for a man's character.[17] In " The Gentleman Farmer " Gwyn's fall is due to excess of pride in his reason, a fault which Swift, Pope and many other eighteenth-century writers were continually reproving. A lack of the great Augustan virtue of " clear good sense " is a fault from which many of Crabbe's characters suffer.

Perhaps the most noticeable tone in his poetry is one best described by the word " disillusion "; the feeling that the latter end of joy is always woe; that things and men are not what

[16] *Ib.* 10. 82-5; see also 12. 279-82. [17] See *The Borough* 4. 200 ff.; 6; 7.

they seem, or what the fancy of the sentimental and romantic temper has made them seem, to be. His most famous poem. *The Village*, is an excellent expression of this attitude. Crabbe is not guilty of an easy optimism nor a frequent use of rose-colored glasses. Says the exquisite Amarinth:

> I look upon optimism as a most quaint disease, an eruption that breaks out upon the soul, and destroys all its interest, all its beauty. The optimist dresses up the amazing figures of life like Dresden shepherds and shepherdesses and pipes a foolish tune—the Old Hundreth or some such thing—for them to dance to. We cannot all refuse to see anything but comic opera peasants around us.[18]

This Crabbe would have heartily endorsed. His mind is disenchanted.[19] As his biographers and critics are never weary of telling us, his boyhood was spent in the Village of Aldeborough, a place remarkable for the nakedness and bleakness of its surroundings and for the rude, violent, ignorant character of its lawless inhabitants whom he has pictured in *The Village*. This sand bank on the German Ocean was a place calculated to discourage the growth of illusions, and it is true that the boy learned very early the darker side of man's character. But, as "Silford Hall"[20] tells us, it was not only from his contact with the "rude amphibious race" but through the moral instruction of his mother whose stern religious creed required her to inform her young son "How weak is man, how much to ill inclined"—(150). In the same piece of autobiographical verse, Crabbe describes his visit to the Great Hall, Silford. In this excursion one of the most outstanding incidents was the experience of seeing a series of great paintings. And what does he remember about them? The display of fierce passions, vice, violence—the darker side of man's character. His guide points them out:

> 'Come, let us on!—see there a Flemish view,
> A country fair, and all as Nature true.
> See there the merry creatures, great and small,
> Engaged in drinking, gaming, dancing all,
> Fiddling or fighting—all in drunken joy!'—
> 'But is this Nature?' said the wondering Boy.

[18] *The Green Carnation* (New York, 1894), p. 102.
[19] Huchon, *George Crabbe*, p. 341.
[20] *Posthumous Tales* 1.

> Be sure it is! and those Banditti there—
> Observe the faces, forms, the eyes, the air:
> See rage, revenge, remorse, disdain, despair!'
> 'And is that Nature, too?' the stripling cried.—
> 'Corrupted Nature,' said the serious guide. (416-26)

Another early and indelible impression, for these verses belong to the last years of his life. He also recalls his wonder at the multifarious means of pursuing pleasure at the Great House—the billiard room, the books, pictures, statuary, and sports of the field and stream. He cries

> 'What then must their possessors feel? how grand
> And happy they who can such joys command!
> For they may pleasures all their lives pursue,
> The winter pleasures, and the summer's too—
> Pleasures for every hour in every day—
> Oh! how their time must pass in joy away.'
> So Peter said.—Replied the courteous Dame:
> 'What you call pleasure scarcely owns the name.
> The very changes of amusement prove
> There's nothing that deserves a lasting love.
> They hunt, they course, they shoot, they fish, they game;
> The objects vary, though the end the same—
> A search for that which flies them; no, my Boy!
> 'Tis not enjoyment, 'tis pursuit of joy.' (514-27)

Another lesson in disillusion—the fleeting, will-o'-the-wisp nature of pleasure and joy. The sense of this is so strong in Crabbe that it can be said to have haunted him; as Huchon writes, "it is the mainspring of his tragic stories."[21] All through the early part of his life he was given a liberal education in the least amiable traits in the animal, man, as the famous, "Bunbury Letter" evidences. It is not a very pretty picture; its harshness, greed, selfishness and brutality must have left a lasting mark on a mind naturally open, sensitive and affectionate; and, like Amarinth, he must be forgiven for refusing "to see anything but comic opera peasants around us." He has gone through the fire and no amount of latter-day pleasantness and success was able to eradicate the results of the experiences from his mind or from his work. It became a permanent part of that complete temperament best described by the word "realistic." His disillusion, then,

[21] *George Crabbe*, p. 341.

is not wholly accounted for by looking upon it as one of the many attributes which he inherited from neo-classic verse; the same must be said of his predeliction for decay.

Aspects of decay and the less agreeable surroundings of man which occur in Crabbe are native to English Poetry where a tendency toward realism is to be found in all periods; but it is particularly so of neo-classic verse. Ben Jonson, in many ways the father of that movement, has left us a few pieces of unflinching realism in the line of sordidness and decay, the most remarkable being his strange mock-heroic epigram "On The Famous Voyage." [22] Crabbe makes a different use of such elements, but the tendency is there. Even his terrible street scenes are adumbrated in parts of neo-classic verse.

> For thee, the sturdy paver thumps the ground,
> Whilst ev'ry stroke his lab'ring lungs resound;
> For thee the scavenger bids kennels glide
> Within their bounds and heaps of dirt subside. . . .
> Ungrateful odours common shores diffuse,
> And dropping vaults distill unwholesome dews. . . .
> . . . Here steams ascend
> That, in mixed fumes, the wrinkled nose offend.
> Where chandler's cauldrons boil; where fishy prey
> Hide the wet stall, long absent from the sea; . . .
> And where huge hogsheads sweat with trainy oil.[23]

And Swift's unsavory ending of "A City Shower" is a familiar example:

> Sweepings from Butcher's Stalls, Dung, Guts and Blood,
> Drown'd Puppies, stinking Sprats, all drenched in mud.
> Dead Cats, and Turnip-Tops come tumbling down the Flood.

But it should be remembered that the most remarkable development in Crabbe's poetry is his changing of the focus of his realism from the external to the internal, from matter to character. It is not without interest that the poet knew *The Mirrour for Magisrates*, for he, too, is fascinated by the spectacle of "falls"—partly because this phase of life is congenial to the realist and partly because his being was stamped with the pathos and pain of gradual decay in two people—his

[22] *Works* (1875) 8. 232 ff.
[23] John Gay, *Trivia*, 13-16; 171-72; 274-52.

father and his wife. His father was a strong, stern man, respected in the community for his position as collector of the salt duties and for his honesty, strength of character and domestic virtues. But in later life a habit of drinking acquired when electioneering for a local potentate, ruined by degrees his character and home happiness. From reading Milton and Pope to his children he descended to the less amiable pursuits of drinking and smashing the dinner-plates when the meal displeased him. The decay in the health of Crabbe's wife was accompanied by the terrible affliction of a slow loss of her mental powers, the change being all the more pitiable from her original brightness and capacity of mind. The influence of so sad a spectacle continued over a period of many years and witnessed every day must have been powerful. Crabbe writes to Scott:

> About 18 mos. since I lost my poor Mrs. C., after such gradual Waste of Strength and Faculties as I had never witnessed before, a Decline of at least 15 yrs. scarcely enlivened by any intervening Prospect of recovery.[24]

Mrs. Crabbe died in 1813, and since the poet states the duration of her illness to have been fifteen years she must have ailed from 1789 to 1813. It is in this period that decay of mind and character receives its strongest treatment from Crabbe, especially in *The Borough* (1810) and *Tales* (1812). In *Tales of the Hall* (1819) and *Posthumous Tales* there is markedly less of decay. This alone might have turned his mind to the subject. There is no question about its fascination for him, however, for it is a theme which returns again and again in his verse. According to his son, even when he made his attempts at novel writing the plot turned on the same motif.[25] But quite aside from personal experience the subject is, as has been said, congenial to the realist. It is one which a merely comfortable and pleasant art would avoid. In his pictures of decay Crabbe is mercilessly realistic, even as Hogarth is. Both artists have depicted the tragedy of gradual decay, of slowly increasing vice and misery, ending in a wretched death. *Marriage-a-la-Mode, The Rake's Progress* flinch no more from an

[24] Letter, Trowbridge, June 1815. See *TLS*, Sept. 22, 1932, p. 666.
[25] *Life*, p. 167.

unsoftened, uncompromising realism than do Crabbe's portrayal's of Blaney, Clelia, Benbow, Peter Grimes, Edward Shore and a dozen others; both men thinking to rouse their fellows from mental and moral torpor by the force of their representations.

But there is still another facet to be examined—Crabbe is arrested by the differences between youth and old age, the "then" and "now" in the same individual, and feels the strange, mixed emotions which the sight engenders:

> This was the youth, and he is thus when old;
> Then we at once the work of time survey,
> And in an instant see a life's decay;
> Pain mixed with pity in our bosoms rise,
> And sorrow takes new sadness from surprise.[26]

To trace the progress of decay is a fascinating task for the realist:

> Minutely trace man's life; year after year,
> Through all his days let all his deeds appear,
> And then, though some may in that life be strange,
> Yet there appears no vast nor sudden change:
> *The links that bind these various deeds are seen*
> *And no misterious void is left between.*[27]

It is this which gripped Arnold Bennett and gave him no rest until he had completed the record of the passage of Constance and Sophia from youth to miserable old age; Maupassant felt the sorrow and surprise of Crabbe at a "life's decay" and wrote *Une Vie*; Wordsworth, the story of Margaret. The realist does not accept the sad spectacle of decay as simply that; he is immediately seized with the desire to trace the links that bind the bundle of the years together, leaving "No mysterious void between." The logic of events must be met unflinchingly, their steps traced with Hogarthian determination, until the chain connecting "was" with "is" stands a tragic syllogism whose conclusion is "decadence." Thus Crabbe in "The Parting Hour" fittingly begins his story with a scene of an old man and woman enjoying their ease, the sunlight, and a passive, inarticulate affection. Here is the starting point, here is what starts the realist on his examination of the chain of

[26] *Tales* 2. 11-15.

[27] *Ib.* 1-6. Italics mine.

events in the lives of these two old people which have produced the present situation. He must destroy the mysterious voids. In another story, Dinah and Rupert make a strange pair when seen together: she, all studied grace and elegance, well-clothed, well-fed; he, an object of charity and worn with age and disappointment. Why should Dinah look at Rupert? Yet these two were once lovers until a long separation had caused a difference in fortunes and an estrangement; for Dinah had not remained true to herself or to Rupert; and had twisted her soul from its once open, honest bent to one of hypocrisy and smallness:

> . . . —at prayers he sees
> The pious Dinah dropped upon her knees;
> Thence as she walks the street with stately air,
> As chance directs, oft meet the parted pair:
> When he, with thickset coat of badge-man's blue
> Moves near her shaded silk of changeful hue;
> When his thin locks of grey approach her braid,
> A costly purchase made in beauty's aid;
> When his frank air, and his unstudied pace,
> Are seen with her soft manner, air, and grace,
> And his plain artless look with her sharp, meaning face;
> *It might some wonder in a stranger move,*
> *How these together might have talked of love.*[28]

But the reader, unlike the stranger, has no cause for wonder, because Crabbe has filled in the voids and traced in Dinah the gradual decay of morality and principle whose result is pictured in the verses quoted.

In respect to moralizing and didacticism, Crabbe is not nearly so akin to the eighteenth century as is generally supposed. What does he himself think of the moral value of poetry? In the Prefaces to his longer poems and in some of his letters, Crabbe attempts to make clear his views upon this subject. In the Preface to *Tales of The Hall* (1819) he has this to say:

> The first intention of a poet must be to please; for if he means to instruct, he must render the instruction . . . palatable and pleasant. I will not assume the tone of a moralist nor promise that my relations shall be beneficial to mankind; but I have endeavoured . . . that in whatsoever I have related . . . there should be nothing

[28] *Tales*, 4. 306-18. Italics mine.

introduced which has a tendency to excuse the vices of man, by associating with them sentiments that demand our respect, and talents that compel our admiration.

So far, Crabbe has repeated the reverend and hoary dictum that giving pleasure is the object of poetry; and that moral instruction, if any, must be administered in the form of the sugar-coated pill. Then he denies his tales the power to benefit mankind morally, but allows them a negative virtue in that they will not morally injure anyone. Still he has not asserted or denied that poetry is an efficient medium of moral instruction. But in a letter to Hatchard (Nov. 11, 1819), he is more explicit:

> Little, I am afraid, can be effected by the Muse of the most moral and even seraphic Endowments: the Urania of Milton and the—I know not what to call her—of Young included: Creating in the Reader a general sobriety and some elevation of Mind is all I think that can be expected or that will be found to arise from the perusal of the more serious and sublime poetry.[29]

Crabbe wistfully considers the possibility of poetry as a source of moral betterment; he would like to believe in it; he has been brought up upon eighteenth-century verse which had no doubts as to its efficacy as a teacher; he is a clergyman of the Church of England; he has a strong sense of duty, of what is right and wrong; he would like in his own poetry to convey "instructive truth" or "warn the giddy and awake the gay" by his verse; but he is also a realist and is sceptical of any more immediate results than general though vague uplift. He must, then, place the whole problem on a wider basis. He has the feeling that

> 'Tis good to know, 'tis pleasant to impart
> These turns and movements of the human heart;[30]

But why? And, more particularly, why does he tend to treat those turns and movements of the human heart which are the opposite of pleasant, serene and joyful? In a short fragment entitled "Tragic Tales, Why," we are enlightened:

> 'I have observed,' said Richard, 'when I ask
> Of those around us, and your memory task

[29] A. M. Broadley and W. Jerrold, *Romance of an Elderly Poet*, p. 242.
[30] *The Borough* 24. 437-8.

> For their Adventures and their Lives, what fate,
> How tragic most the Stories you relate.
> Is it that most are wretched, or have we
> The evil fate to live with Misery—'
> 'Not so perhaps, but Men of common Lives,
> Who live contented with themselves and Wives,
> Afford no Subject for the Muse than Mirth.'

But when great grief or misfortune presses upon a man's heart, then

> The awakened poet paints the due Distress;
> Tells how it came and presses on the mind,
> That we are men, and of the suffering kind.
> We own the grieving and oppressed as friends;
> The mind enlarges as its Grief extends;
> And grief that's painted true improves the Heart it rends.

The hint is found in the last lines; a sort of catharsis is indicated. Here is a justification for his own poetry of vice and misery, sordidness and distress. He takes up the same idea in the Preface to *The Borough* and expands upon it:

I confess it is not pleasant to be detained so long by subjects so repulsive to the feelings of many, as the sufferings of mankind. . . . Yet am I not of the opinion that my verses, or indeed the verses of any other person, can so represent the evils and distresses of life as to make any material impression on the mind, and much less any of injurious nature. Alas! sufferings real, evident, continually before us, have not effects very serious or lasting, even in the minds of the more reflecting and compassionate; nor indeed does it seem right that the pain caused by sympathy should serve for more than a stimulus to benevolence. If then the strength and solidity of truth placed before our eyes have effect so feeble and transitory, I need not be very apprehensive that my representations of Poor-houses and Prisons, of wants and sufferings, however faithfully taken, will excite any feelings which can be seriously lamented. It has always been held as a salutary exercise of the mind, to contemplate the evils and miseries of our nature: I am not, therefore, without hope, that even this gloomy subject of Imprisonment, . . . will excite in some minds that mingled pity and abhorrence, which, while it is not unpleasant to the feelings, is useful in its operation; it ties and binds us to all mankind by sensations common to us all, and in some degree connects us, without degradation, even to the most miserable and guilty of our fellowmen.

This is a deeper, far nobler view of the moral import of poetry than that of a narrow didacticism, and it reveals in Crabbe

one of his highest qualities—profound humanism. He has a vivid sense of the community of mankind, the humblest and the most grand of which are bound together by common sensations. It is the poet who is capable of awakening in us this vision of homogeneity and continuity "without degradation." Observation of human feelings and motives makes for a larger and more tolerant view of mankind; sitting in the seat of judgment, we show more mercy:

> How is it, when they in judgment sit
> On the same fault, now censure, now acquit?
> Is it not thus, that *here* we view the sin,
> And *there* the powerful cause that drew us in?
> 'Tis not that men are to the evil blind,
> But that a different object fills the mind.
> In judging others we can see too well
> Their grievous fall, but not how grieved they fell;
> Judging ourselves, we to our minds recall,
> Not how we fell, but how we grieved to fall.[31]

In practice, Crabbe adheres far more to his conception of the moral values of poetry as here shown than his critics recognize. The most notable commentators upon Crabbe are wrong on this subject—for example, Huchon:

> For Crabbe almost always, instead of making himself one with his heroes by force of sympathy, stands aside from them and loads them with reproaches, like a judge delivering a pitiless sentence.[32]

This is a misleading statement, for his unfailing humor, his sympathy, even tenderness, and his shrewd, kindly understanding leave no such total impression as Huchon would have us believe. This is not to deny that Crabbe is sometimes didactic; but finger-shaking is far less characteristic of him than the tone of deep but quiet indignation which warms the lines of *The Village*. He is usually content with keeping outside and letting the picture speak for itself, as in the terrible delineations of misery occuring in his street scenes. Very rarely does Crabbe devote a whole poem to moralizing, and when he does it is only a few lines in length.[33] I know of but one long poem of moralizing all compact; and that has no pretensions to

[31] *Tales of the Hall* 3. 396-405.
[32] *George Crabbe*, p. 481.
[33] See, e. g., "Conscious Guiltiness," "Belief and Unbelief."

being anything but a versified sermon.[34] Crabbe is even capable of getting amusement from the actions of a complete rogue, if he is interesting enough. Lawyer Swallow is a good example. He is like Nicholas Nickleby's wicked uncle—he lures his victims by feeding them well: Swallow continues his depredations by way of the stomach for many years; but, at last, even the most gullible know his habits and he can find no more victims. He caps his life of swindling with a beautiful climax; he turns a zealous Christian, thereby plundering the sect of all the funds which they had entrusted to him as a devout believer and a skilled man of business. Crabbe serves up this unsavory dish of wicked Swallow with such evident relish that we are not inclined to take very seriously the prim little couplet at the end—

> Still we of Swallow as a monster speak,
> A hard, bad man, who preyed upon the weak.[35]

The deliciously humorous picture of the Vicar in Letter 3 of *The Borough* is another case in point. The moralistic couplets on "love without restraint" seem almost like a tongue in the cheek, coming, as they do, in the midst of the delineations of the male lily. Crabbe isn't overnice. In one passage he even mentions specifically venereal diseases, and not with an accompanying fulmination against promiscuous intercourse.[36] And here is a pretty frank picture of a woman who wants a man. It is easy to understand the friends of the Reverend persuading him to a modification of this passage in later editions, for it occurs in full blood in the first only:

> Fie, Nathan! fie! to let a sprightly Jade
> Leer on thy Bed, then ask thee how 'twas made
> And lingering walk around at Head and Feet,
> To see thy nightly comforts all complete;
> Then waiting seek—not what she said she sought,
> And bid a penny for her Master's Thought;
> (A thought she knew, and thou coulds't not send hence,
> Well as thou lov'dst them, for ten thousand Pence!)
> And thus with some bold Hint she would retire,
> That wak'd the idle wish and stirred the slumbering fire.[37]

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[34] See *Tales* 14. [35] *The Borough* 6. 237 ff. [36] *Ib.* 9. 53-50.
[37] First ed. of *Parish Register* 2, instead of present lines 34-60.

Even in his treatment of religion, he is seldom unduly pious or strait-laced. When Crabbe's characters turn their thoughts to heaven it is only because there is nothing whatever to engage their interest in this world. This is his realistic explanation of extreme piety, though he is a churchman. One of his devout characters even has beatific visions, such as of the Saviour resting in the tomb by night; these are given by the poet as the result of high fever and, sleep having restored her somewhat,

> Reason dwelt where fancy strayed before,
> And the mind wandered from its views no more.[38]

Crabbe realizes that after we have been in circulation for some time, chafed in the pockets of the world, our overnice disapprobation is worn smooth and we are no longer so quick to blame and condemn, knowing that nothing is either black or white.

> Nay, where we still the vice itself condemn
> We bear the vicious and consort with them.[39]

Crabbe is, of course, a little school-teacherish and didactic at times; but what disturbs one most is his frequent middle-class utterances which are anything but "O Altitudoes." Here is the poor boy who makes good:

> But never in his fancy's proudest dream
> Did he the master of that mansion seem:
> Young was he then, and little did he know
> What years on care and diligence bestow.[40]

This is something like Poor Richard; and Crabbe's praise is continually rendered to the more pedestrian or "commercial" virtues so highly valued by the eighteenth century, such as thrift, industry, common sense, honesty, moderation, restraint—good solid, practical, palpable virtues whose benefits are mensurable and immediate. Prudential morality is often in evidence—be sincere and honest because you'll get along better:

> From him one word of honest counsel hear—
> *And think it always gain to be sincere.*[41]

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[38] See *Tales* 8. [39] See *Ib.* 9. [40] *Tales of the Hall* 1. 61-4.
[41] *Posthumous Tales* 2. 1070-71. Crabbe's italics.

It is unfortunate that Crabbe should occasionally burden his readers with gratuitous Poloniousisms such as "For none can spend like him who learns to spare."[42]

Crabbe inherited from the neo-classic verse certain attributes which are less characteristic of him. His laudatory verse is very much like the Whig panegyrics, the most famous example being that to Lord Robert Manners and the Duke of Rutland at the end of *The Village*.[43] His shorter poems such as *The Library* and *The Newspaper* are in a direct line from such technical, utilitarian poems as *The Art of Preserving Health* and *The Sugar Cane*. He refers lightly, wittily, and humorously to classical characters, deities, and events.[44] The swelling, rhetorical note of much of eighteenth century poetry can occasionally be heard,[45] and the usual macabre details of the graveyard school are evident.[46] Withal his poems are almost utterly lacking in lyricism.

In his versification and diction, the neo-classic influence is also apparent. His chief medium is the heroic couplet, founded on Pope and Dryden, modified for purposes of dialogue. The later couplet is, generally speaking, freer, less terse, more untidy than the earlier. He does employ the stanza form but almost always, in short, occasional poems, *Sir Eustace Grey* being an exception. In a fragmentary narrative called "*Tracy*" (917 lines) the poet starts his tale with seven Spenserian stanzas; but, apparently feeling uncomfortable in that measure, he swings into heroic couplets for the body of the poem. Later on five more Spenserian stanzas are introduced in order to relate a dream of one of the characters. The fragment ends with four stanzas in Rime Royal. This is his freest poem, metrically, but is only an uncorrected fragment. It is likely that he would have cast it all into couplets when he corrected it, as in the case of a fragment called "The Amours of George" (120 lines) in octosyllabic couplets; it is substantially the same story as that told by George in *Tales of the Hall*, in heroic

[42] *Tales of the Hall* 1. 193.

[43] See also "To His Grace The Duke of Rutland" and "Verses Written For The Duke of Rutland's Birthday."

[44] See *Tales of the Hall* 200 ff.; *Ib.* 7. 279. *Posthumous Tales*, 333-34.

[45] See *Posthumous Tales* 416-19.

[46] See *Tales of the Hall* 9. 869-880.

couplets.[47] The interesting element in Crabbe's diction is the fact that its scale runs from the rigidly accurate and scientific to the usual, everyday, to the worst kind of eighteenth-century poetic diction. He is even capable of indicating school children by " the chubby crew " and birds by " plumy people."

4.

Crabbe and Neo-Classic Theory

One feature of neo-classicism with which Crabbe is directly related is its realism. Neo-classicism is, to a great extent, a reaction against the excesses of the Renaissance formlessness, over-elaborateness, wildness and extravagance. Neo-classicism insisted upon moderation, good sense and reason; upon a foundation of literature in what was real, though limited, the language and conduct of men and women in London society being the criteria. Poetry was to deal with prosaic, everyday occasions—with the conscious and the explicable rather than the imponderable or subconscious. Dr. Johnson, for example, disliked the Pastoral because its type was peculiarly open to abuses the opposite from good sense and real life:

> Poets give the title of a Pastoral to verses, in which the speakers, after a slight mention of their flocks, fall to complaints of errors in the church, and corruptions in the government, or to lamentations of the death of some illustrious person, whom, when once the poet has called a shepherd, he has no longer any labour upon his hands, but can make the clouds weep, and lilies wither, and the sheep hang their heads, without art or learning, genius or study. . . . The facility of treating actions or events in the Pastoral style, has incited many writers, from whom more judgment might have been expected . . . to write with an utter disregard both of life and nature, and fill their productions with mythological allusions, with incredible fictions, and with sentiments which neither passion nor reason could have dictated.[48]

Another characteristic feature of neo-classic art is its acceptance of limitations, a sane recognition of reality in which there was no place for the Renaissance striving after the unattainable and its scorn of all boundaries. A certain disillusionment

[47] See Huchon, *George Crabbe,* pp. 477 ff. for accurate treatment of Crabbe's versification.

[48] J. E. Brown, *The Critical Opinions of Samuel Johnson,* Princeton, 1926.

in man himself was felt by the neo-classicists who believed that we are no better than we should be. The idea of the chain-of-being is an interesting example. Except in degree there was thought to be little difference between man and the other animals, the lower creatures being no more a convenience to man than he to them. This implies a degradation of man from his former exalted position in the universe. Clearly he was no longer the Renaissance man to whom all things were possible.[49] In the feeling of disillusionment and in the acceptance of limitations Crabbe again is obviously akin to neo-classic writers.

The question arises, how far is Crabbe's theory of poetry in agreement with the standards of neo-classicism? In the Preface to the *Tales* he writes a dignified apologia for his kind of poetry:

> These compositions have no pretensions to be estimated with the more lofty and heroic kind of poems, but I feel great reluctance in admitting that they have not a fair and legitimate claim to the poetic character: in vulgar estimation, indeed, all that is not prose passes for poetry; but I have not ambition of so humble a kind as to be satisfied with a concession which requires nothing in the poet, except his ability for counting syllables . . . nor was I aware that by describing, as faithfully as I could, men, manners, and things, I was forfeiting a just title [that of poet] . . . which has been freely granted to many. . . . Nor is it perhaps with strict justice determined that the credit and reputation of those verses which strongly and faithfully delineate character and manners, should be lessened in the opinion of the public by the very accuracy which gives value and distinction to the productions of the pencil.

Crabbe then turns to another kind of poetry, a different conception of the poet. He may be

> one who, in the excursions of his fancy between heaven and earth, lights upon a kind of fairyland, in which he places a creation of his own where he embodies, shapes, and gives action and adventure to his ideal offspring; taking captive the imagination of his readers, he elevates them above the grossness of actual being, into the soothing and pleasant atmosphere of supramundane existence: there he obtains for his visionary inhabitants the interest that engages a reader's attention without ruffling his feelings, and excites that moderate kind of sympathy which the realities of nature oftentimes fail to produce, either because they are so familiar and in-

[49] See Arthur O. Lovejoy, "Pride in Eighteenth-Century Thought," *MLN*, 36 (1921). 31-7.

significant that they excite no determinate emotion, or are so harsh and powerful that the feelings excited are grating and distasteful . . . let it be . . . conceded that their is a higher . . . kind of composition, nay, the only kind that has pretensions to inspiration; still, that these poets should so entirely engross the title as to exclude those who address their productions to the plain sense and sober judgment of their readers, rather than to the fancy and imagination, I must repeat that I am unwilling to admit—because I conceive that, by granting such right of exclusion, a vast deal of what has been hitherto received as genuine poetry would no longer be entitled to that appellation.

Crabbe has read and liked the poetry of the lake group and when he writes his Preface, the Romantic Movement has reached its peak; it is, therefore, impossible for him to deny the high merit of a poetry not recognized by the standards of neo-classical criticism:[50] but, aside from that, there is not much in this quotation that appears different from what any Augustan might have written. It is clear that the basis of his poetry is the delineation of men and manners, and it is to be addressed to the "plain sense and sober judgment" of the readers, not to their "fancy and imagination." With only an anthology knowledge of Crabbe it might well be thought that his statements are of little or no interest. What else would a poet, largely neo-classic in temperament and background, writing in that tradition, say in a preface to his verse? "Man and manners," "truth," "nature," "sense," "sober judgment" had been critical commonplaces for a century. But knowledge of his work and of his other critical statements convince one that there is a genuine distinction, and it lies in his meaning of "truth" and "nature."

For neo-classicism "truth" and "nature" was, speaking generally, what everybody of good judgment thought; and its materials were drawn from those attributes which were common to most men. Anything else is impertinent, for, as Sir Joshua Reynolds writes, "Whatever notions are not conformable to nature, or universal opinion must be considered as more or less capricious."[51] But Crabbe differs radically from this;

[50] It is interesting that Crabbe treats of two extremes in poetry—the bare realistic men-and-manners kind and the highly imaginative and fanciful which "lights upon a kind of fairyland." There is no middle ground, illustrated by a poem like "Michael," for example.

[51] *Discourses on Painting,* "The Seventh Discourse"; see also "Third Discourse."

by truth he means accuracy, factuality. Science, for instance, he considers the greatest disseminator of truth—the same sort of truth which he refers to in his Preface.[52] The introduction to the *Tales of the Hall* contains an interesting invocation:

> Come, then, fair Truth! and let me clearly see
> The minds I paint, as they are seen in thee;
> To me their merits and their faults impart;
> Give me to say, 'frail being! such thou art,'
> And closely let me view the naked human heart.
> (121-26)

His invocation is not to the heavenly Muse of Milton and Shelley, not to Urania, but to Truth, Clarity, Accuracy, Reality, that which allows the poet to "closely view" and "clearly see" the "naked human heart." Like Wordsworth, Crabbe insisted upon the poet's keeping his eye on the object. His letter to Mary Leadbeater is interesting in this respect:

> But your motive for writing to me was your desire of knowing whether my men and women were really existing creatures, or beings of my own imagination? . . . Yes I will tell you readily about my creatures, whom I endeavored to paint as nearly as I could . . . there is not one of whom I had not in mind the original; but I was obliged, in some cases, to take them from their real situations, in one or two instances to change even the sex, and in many, the circumstances. The nearest to real life was the proud, ostentatious man in the 'Borough' who disguises an ordinary mind by doing great things; but the others approach to reality at greater or less distances. Indeed, I do not know that I could paint merely from my own fancy: and there is no cause why we should. Is there not diversity sufficient in society? and who can go, even but a little, into the assemblies of our fellow-wanderers from the way of perfect rectitude, and not find characters so varied and so pointed, that he need not call upon his imagination? [53]

It is only necessary for the poet to use for his material the individual. A neo-classicist might suspect him of numbering the streaks of the tulip—and he would be correct. His spirited defence of his portraiture of the obscure and the decayed or deformed brings out the great difference between his own theory of poetry and that of neo-classicism:

> The Letter on Itinerant Players will to some appear too harshly written, their profligacy, and their distresses magnified; but though

[52] See *The Borough*, 7. 280 ff.; 9. 44 ff.; 9. 91 ff.
[53] *Life*, p. 230-33.

the respectability of a part of these people may give us a more favourable view of the whole body; though some actors be sober and some managers prudent; still there is vice and misery left, more than sufficient to justify my description. But if I could find only one woman who (passing forty years on many stages, and sustaining many principal characters) laments in her unrespected old age, that there was no work house to which she could legally sue for admission; if I could produce only one female, seduced upon the boards, and starved in her lodging, . . . if I could exhibit only one youth who sought refuge from parental authority in the licentious freedom of a wandering company; yet, with three such examples, I should feel myself justified in the account I have given.[54]

Truth, then, is accuracy of representation and nature is anything that has existence; that a thing or a person actually exists in real life is the only justification which Crabbe requires for its portrayal no matter if the subject is disgusting, deformed, partial, accidental, or otherwise deviating from the general and normal:

Of these characters one Benbow may be thought too low and despicable to be admitted here, but he is a Borough-character, and, however, disgusting in some respects a picture may be, it will please some, and be tolerated by many, if it can boast that one merit of being a faithful likeness.

Crabbe has parted with one of the principal manifestoes of neoclassicism. " Deformity," says Sir Joshua Reynolds

is not nature, but an accidental deviation from her accustomed practice. This general idea, therefore, ought to be called Nature; and nothing else, correctly speaking, has a right to that name. But we are so far from speaking in common conversation, with any such accuracy, that, on the contrary, when we criticize Rembrandt and other Dutch painters, who introduced into their historical pictures exact representations of individual objects with all their imperfections we say—though it is not in good taste, yet it is nature.

This misapplication of terms must be very often perplexing to the young student. Is not art, he may say, an imitation of nature? Must he not, therefore, who imitates her with the greatest fidelity be the best artist? By this mode of reasoning Rembrandt has a higher place than Raffaelle. But a very little reflection will serve to show us that these particularities cannot be nature; for how can that be the nature of man, in which no two individuals are the same? [55]

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[54] Preface to *The Borough.*

[55] *Discourses on Painting,* " The Seventh Discourse."

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